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Arctic diplomacy and war in Europe

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We are living during a historic shift in international relations and Arctic diplomacy. Russia's further invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has inspired European and North American diplomatic action, deterrence, and economic sanctions. There are indications these shifts may reflect a lasting transformation in Arctic geopolitics. In particular, the [Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine](#) on 3 March by Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, signals a historic shift in Arctic geopolitics and international relations.

The *Joint Statement* notes that Russia's responsibility for "grave impediments to international cooperation," and affirms "the enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation." It reads:

The core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, based on international law, have long underpinned the work of the Arctic Council, a forum which Russia currently chairs. In light of Russia's flagrant violation of these principles, our representatives will not travel to Russia for meetings of the Arctic Council. Additionally, our states are temporarily pausing participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies, pending consideration of the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council's important work in view of the current circumstances.

This statement reflects a broader geopolitical transition and constitutes the most significant event in Arctic international relations since the Arctic Council's creation.

For more than a quarter of a century, the Arctic Council has shown exceptional resilience to major international events, thriving as a high-level forum for international cooperation, deepening ideas of the high north as a low tension "zone of peace"¹ insulated from global politics. Indeed, the explicit exclusion of military security from the [Arctic Council's founding mandate](#) has facilitated continued circumpolar cooperation despite a "soft securitization" of Arctic issues,² and active measures by member states on opposing sides of armed conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.

Russia's 2014 war on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea seemed to signal, for some commentators, the resilience of Arctic exceptionalism, reflecting the prioritization of regional diplomacy³ and promotion of regional interests through a rules-based order⁴ harmonized with the apparent limits of Ukraine's vital strategic interest to Europe and North America.⁵ For others analysts, these events made clear that regional Arctic relations

respond to global politics. Russia's seizure of the Dutch-flagged Greenpeace vessel *Arctic Sunrise* in 2013, and – more importantly – western sanctions against Russia in 2014, demonstrated the reality of an Arctic shaped by global dynamics, akin to other regions of the world.⁶

Arctic diplomacy reflects global geopolitics. Just as an earlier age of Arctic politics closely reflected US-Soviet bipolarity during the Cold War, the Arctic Council's historic resilience to international shocks can be understood as a feature of the liberal institutionalism of the unipolar post-Cold War era.⁷ In recent years, Arctic geopolitics have been pulled between “U.S. nostalgia for unipolarity and Russian dreams of multipolarity”, with an emerging Sino-American bipolarity predicting a new Arctic geopolitics divided between Sino-Russian and Nordic-North American spheres.⁸ The Joint Statement of 3 March portends how closely the future of the Arctic Council will follow the arc of global geopolitics.

History is moving fast. The days immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, brought early indications that Arctic states were responding differently than in 2014, in ways consistent with emerging bipolarity. On 26 February, first [Sweden](#) and then [Finland](#) indicated that their Ambassadors would not participate at an upcoming conference hosted by a Toronto-based think tank if Russian diplomats were present. Conference organizers indicated their “belie[f] this is an important moment to discuss the Arctic Council and the future of its membership.”⁹ When organizers later confirmed Russian diplomats would not be attending the event, Greenland's Head of Representation to Canada and the US, along with the US Coordinator for the Arctic Region, and Canada's Senior Arctic Official, and the Ambassadors to Canada from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark each confirmed their attendance. In this sense, the conference marked a shift in Arctic diplomacy even before it starts later this week.

Statements from the Arctic Council's Permanent Participants in Russia in the days immediately before the *Joint Statement* revealed divergent views. On 28 February, the [Russian Section of the Saami Council](#) walked a careful line, as “the Saami people in Russia find themselves in an extremely unstable, one might say, dangerous situation...Now, more than ever the Sami people in Russia need international support to continue cooperation between the Sami of the four countries.” On 1 March, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) took a radically different position in a letter to President Putin, announcing “our support [for] your aspiration and the decision taken to protect the rights and interests of the inhabitants of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the security of all multinational Russia.”¹⁰ While RAIPON's statement may reflect genuine support for President Putin's imperial irredentism, the Saami Council reminds us of the very real threats, coercion, and authoritarian duress faced by Indigenous people in Russia.

In the days immediately following the *Joint Statement*, other Permanent Participants offered distinct perspectives. On 3 March, [Gwich'in Council International welcomed the pause](#) on Arctic Council activities, adding “we stand with our partners around the world in calling for peace in Ukraine, peace can only be achieved by Russia recalling its armed forces immediately.” Four days later, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) also declared support for the temporary pause on Arctic Council activities. ICC's statement emphasises that they emerged at the height of Arctic bipolarity in 1977, and that Inuit “worked hard to ensure our sisters and brothers from Chukotka were able to join us in 1992.” [ICC's statement](#) reiterates that “Inuit are committed to the Arctic

remaining a zone of peace”, a message “repeated echoed” in “all its guiding documents, most recently in the Utqiagvik Declaration.” Clearly, Arctic Indigenous self-determination and coordination remain deeply enmeshed in the dynamics of global politics.

Russia’s invasion has also provided occasion for ongoing sovereignty games in the triangular relations between Greenland, Denmark, and the European Union.¹¹ On 24 February, Greenland’s Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede endorsed the coordinated sanctions announced at the EU summit in Brussels, declaring that Greenland “strongly condemn[s] Russia’s action against the Ukrainian people” and intends “to show our solidarity with the Ukrainian people by joining the international sanctions against Russia.”¹² Greenland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs also signaled their participation in the decision to pause participation in Arctic Council meetings, along their full “commitment to the Council and our cooperation with the peoples of the Arctic.”¹³ These foreign policy assertions perform sovereign equality, improving Greenland’s international status¹⁴ and speeding up the slow-motion decolonization of the Arctic.

In the few days since the *Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation*, Nordic countries have sent matching signals in other fora for northern cooperation. On 3 March, the Nordic Council of Ministers (including Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, and the self-governing Åland Islands, Faroe Islands, and Greenland) ended all joint activities with Russia – the first time such action has been taken in twenty-five years of regional cooperation.¹⁵ On the same day, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the European Union suspended Russian membership (and Belarusian observer status) in the [Council of the Baltic Sea States \(CBSS\)](#). Finland’s Ambassador for the Barents and Northern Dimension, Jari Vilén, has indicated the Barents Council will soon make a similar decision.¹⁶

The speed, scale, and coordination of European and North American sanctions against Russia is unprecedented, marking a historic shift in relations between Arctic states. Sanctions on the Russian Central Bank, prohibition on Russian bank participation in SWIFT, Germany’s decision to halt Nord Stream 2, and other measures signal allied intent to untangle economic ties and exert maximum pressure on Russia. Germany’s commitment of €100 billion for rearmament, the EU’s novel coordination of military assistance, Denmark’s plan for a June referendum on EU common defence, and Sweden and Finland’s steps to strengthen security cooperation with NATO are similarly indicative of the scale of European security reprioritization. Together, these measures indicate an astonishing degree of democratic will for collective action, as well as a readiness to apply social and economic strengths built through the post-Cold War peace dividend to meet common threats. This sets the stage for still greater cooperation among democratic allies in the Nordic and North American Arctic.

On the night of Russia’s invasion, President Obama’s former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes offered a prescient [comment](#): “War always has unintended consequences. No one knows where this leads, including Putin.” President Putin’s war crimes in Europe are creating a humanitarian crisis for the people of Ukraine, and needless suffering for the people of Russia. While the events of the last few days add new data points to old trends and have already changed the world, we are still living in a highly dynamic moment in Arctic and international relations. Perhaps this itself is the most resilient thesis: that even in the face of such uncertainty, global and Arctic affairs are inseparable.

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- ² Will Greaves and Daniel Pomerants, “‘Soft Securitization’: Unconventional Security Issues and the Arctic Council,” *Politik* 3:20 (2017): 31-46.
- ³ Danita Catherine Burke, *Diplomacy and the Arctic Council* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).
- ⁴ Kristian Sjøby Kristensen and Casper Sakstrup, *Russian Policy in the Arctic after the Ukraine Crisis* (Copenhagen: Centre for Military Studies, 2016).
- ⁵ John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93:5 (2014): 77-89.
- ⁶ Juha Kämpylä and Harri Mikkola, *On Arctic Exceptionalism: Critical Reflections in the Light of the Arctic Sunrise Case and the Crisis in Ukraine* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs).
- ⁷ Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and World Politics: A Theory and its Implications* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- ⁸ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen and Mariia Kobzeva, “The Future Arctic Order: Shaped by Unipolarity, Bipolarity, or Multipolarity,” *per Concordiam* 8 September 2021, at <https://perconcordiam.com/the-future-arctic-order/>.
- ⁹ Eilís Quinn, “Sweden, Finland pull out of Arctic360 conference in Toronto where Russian diplomats scheduled to attend,” *Eye on the Arctic* 26 February 2022 at <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2022/02/sweden-finland-pull-out-arctic360-conference-toronto-where-russian-diplomats>.
- ¹⁰ Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), Letter to the President of the Russian Federation, V.V. Putin, 1 March 2022.
- ¹¹ Ulrik Pram Gad, *National Identity Politics and Postcolonial Sovereignty Games: Greenland, Denmark, and the European Union* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2017).
- ¹² Naalakkersuisut, “Ruslandip pillaatitut iliuuseqarfigineqarnissaanut Kalaallit Nunaat ilannguppoq,” 25 February 2022 at https://naalakkersuisut.gl/da/Naalakkersuisut/Nyheder/2022/02/2502_tilslutning.
- ¹³ Naalakkersuisut, “Ruslandip Ukrainemut tiguaaniarluni saassussinerata kingorna Issittormiut Siunnersuisooqatigiinni suleqatigiinneq pillugu ataatsimoorussamik nalunaarut,” 3 March 2022 at https://naalakkersuisut.gl/kl-GL/Naalakkersuisut/Pisut/2022/03/0303_faelles_erklaering.
- ¹⁴ Marc Jacobsen, “Greenland’s Arctic advantage: Articulations, acts, and appearances of sovereignty games,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 1:1 (2019): 1-23.
- ¹⁵ Nordisk samarbeid, “Nordisk ministerråd fryser samarbeidet med Russland,” at <https://www.norden.org/no/news/nordisk-ministerrad-fryser-samarbeidet-med-rusland>
- ¹⁶ Atle Staalesen, “Nordic countries halt all regional cooperation with Russia,” *Barents Observer*, 6 March 2022 at <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2022/03/nordic-countries-halt-all-regional-cooperation-russia>